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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOC](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: PROBLEMS IN HCMC EXPAT PROTESTANT CHURCH

1. (SBU) Summary: The New Life Fellowship Church (NLF), a Protestant church in HCMC that has served primarily the expatriate community, has run afoul of Vietnamese authorities, apparently due in part to the church's recent outreach to Vietnamese citizens. Working with the church's leader and local authorities, ConGen HCMC encouraged both sides to launch a dialogue that would result in the church's ability to continue its services. The church decided to launch a public campaign on the web, with letters to the Vietnamese Prime Minister and to President Bush regarding its difficulties. This may make resolution more difficult and result in further confrontation with Vietnamese authorities. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On August 29, HCMC learned that services of the NLF had been forcibly cancelled at a Ho Chi Minh City hotel the previous day. PolOff met with the church's pastor, Eric E. Dooley who said the church has 500 to 700 expatriate members and has been operating unofficially in HCMC since 1997. Dooley reported that HCMC District 5 police had told the Windsor Plaza Hotel to stop allowing the NLF to meet at the hotel. While Dooley was at the hotel turning away worshippers from the cancelled service, Vietnamese immigration police delivered a summons to his home. He was questioned for three hours regarding his stay in Vietnam under a business license, but officials took no further action. (Note: Dooley's visa lists his occupation as pastor and is due to expire in January 2006. End note.)

3. (SBU) The initial incident appears to have resulted from the confluence of a number of factors since the beginning of the year:

-- The NLF Church moved its services from downtown District 1, where most foreigners live and work to District 5 (which includes the old Cholon area).

-- The church started advertising in Vietnam News, though VNN two weeks ago stopped taking the ads.

-- The church began Vietnamese-language services.

4. (SBU) Dooley recognized that his church was operating outside of Vietnamese law, and that ministering to Vietnamese citizens in Vietnamese would have been considered more provocative than working with expatriates. He told us that he was willing to stop that service if necessary and to examine other ways of regularizing his mission here. We encouraged him to continue to maintain a dialogue with the HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA).

5. (SBU) On August 30, Consul General met with the HCMC External Relations Office (ERO) to bring this issue to its attention and encourage resolution as an expatriate resident and investor/business climate type issue. ERO promised to see what could be done. PolOff followed up with Tran Ngoc Bao, Vice Chairman of the HCMC CRA. We emphasized the impact that suspension of expatriate services would have on HCMC's image and the business climate here. Bao made clear that there were a number of expat congregations operating with no problems (citing Korean groups in particular.) He said that CRA was working with HCMC authorities, including police, in an effort to find an amicable resolution to the problem. We encouraged them to continue in that vein.

6. (SBU) Later that day we spoke further with Bao who regretted what happened with the NLF Church in District 5. He said, in what we took as a face-saving offer, that the problem lay with the hotel management rather than the police. Bao recommended that Pastor Dooley approach the Windsor Plaza Hotel again to see if it was amenable to allow services to resume. If not, he said, the church might return to its previous locale in a hotel in District 1. Bao added that, if Dooley continued to have problems with the police, he should contact the CRA. Over the longer term, Dooley needs to work with the CRA to find a permanent home for the NLF. Bao suggested that the NLF might affiliate itself with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), the officially recognized Protestant organization. Bao agreed to contact Dooley to begin a dialogue. Following that discussion, Dooley agreed to contact the District 5 hotel, to work with the CRA and to keep us updated on the status of his church.

7. (SBU) On September 6 and 7, we followed up with Pastor Dooley who reported that members of the NLF met in 7 different private homes to worship on September 4. According to Dooley, the church planned to expand worship to 11 private homes on Sunday, September

11. Dooley said that the NLF had "no desire to go creeping back into District 1" and would like to resume services at the Windsor Plaza Hotel in District 5. Pastor Dooley also did not plan to pursue holding services under the aegis of the SECV, though he did note that a meeting with the SECV is "in the works."

18. (SBU) It does not appear that Dooley has been in touch with the CRA since August 29. However, he has initiated a press campaign, contacting Time, AP and Reuters, and has written to Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and President Bush. Dooley informed us that his Vietnamese parishioners had either returned to their former churches to avoid trouble or were worshipping privately in homes.

19. (SBU) Comment: The NLF Church has been operating for years in HCMC without difficulty. Its decision to initiate and publicize outreach to Vietnamese citizens as an unofficial and unregistered church is the likely cause of its current problems. The HCMC Committee on Religious Affairs appeared eager to facilitate the resumption of services for expats but has not engineered a compromise with the NLF.

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